

Newsletter for Birdwatchers

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Editorial

Saving our Natural Heritage

The new year begins on a cheering note : Dr D Barooah (Dass Pharmacy, Temple Road, Sibsagar, Assam 785 640) writes to say that the article on the wetlands of Panidihing (NLBW July-August 97) "helped forcing the Forest Dept of Assam to notify the area as a Bird Sanctuary. Things moved palpably faster after the appearance of the report of poisoning adjutant storks in your periodical"

I hope that our future articles about areas of exceptional natural interest will also result in their protection by the public and the authorities.

Sometime ago, Manohar Malgonkar, the well known writer, wrote to the Editor about the need to preserve the Supa lake and adjoining forests in North Kanara from "development". Apparently a major steel plant is proposed to be set up in the area, and there are plans to denotify portions of sanctuaries nearby so that developers do not infringe the law about a *cordon sanitaire* in the 20 km area around Protected Areas.

The Karnataka Heritage Society under the Chairmanship of Ex-Chief Secretary J.C. Lynn is attempting to preserve this natural treasure, but as yet the signs are not too favourable.

In spite of our Govt. accepting the principles of the World Conservation Strategy, and ratifying the Convention on Biodiversity, industry still receives precedence against the unaccounted advantages of the natural world. What is so distressing is that there is no "openness" in government behaviour. All major decisions are kept under cover till the last minute, and then a decision is announced so that the public do not get a chance to voice their true feelings. If we follow the practice of having a Public Hearing on all major issues, the authorities would be in a much better position to take decisions on the basis of the presentations they receive.

Checklists

With reference to my previous Editorial about not publishing entire checklists on the plea of lack of space there have been protests from knowledgeable readers against this practice, and so we will have to find space for sparrows and crows as well as for the rarest birds. It is true that to have a complete list of the birds of an area is a great convenience.



Birding at Nelapattu & Vedurupattu Bird Refuges, Andhra Pradesh

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INTRODUCTION

The Nelapattu Bird Sanctuary is one of the largest pelicanry in south-east Asia. Hordes of winter migrants have been visiting this refuge for years. Rare and endangered birds such as grey pelicans, open-billed storks, little cormorants, spoonbills, white ibises, night herons, etc., have been known to breed here, and egrets, terns, ducks and waders use it as their roosting site.

Located near Nelapattu village, in Doravari Sathram Mandal of Nellore district in Andhra Pradesh state in southern India, is the Nelapattu Bird Sanctuary (NBS) popularly nick-named as 'pelican-paradise' by birdwatchers. The geographic co-ordinates lie between 13° 51' and 13° 59' South Latitude and 79° 57' and 79° 59' East Longitude. It is approachable both by rail and road. By road, NBS is approachable from the National Highway 5 (NH5), being just 95 kms north of Madras city and 70 kms east of the holy city Thirupathi as also, 80 kms south of Nellore town. October to March is the best season to visit NBS. Both the north east & south west monsoons grace this sanctuary with copious showers, enabling it to record as much as 1000 mm of rainfall annually. Cyclones are common during May and November here. Established in 1976 as a pelicanry, the NBS, has a total area of 458.92 hectares. The nearest railway station is Doravari Sathram (1 km) where only passenger trains stop, but express trains stop at Naidupet (12 km) and at Sullurpet (15 km) railway stations, on the Vijawawada - Madras broad guage line.

The Expedition

On 29th March '97, (Holy Saturday) at 17.20 hrs., we embarked on a weekend birding expedition, by jeep (A.N.J.'s Maruthi Gypsy) to this pelicanry. Except for the "eleventh hour" new battery replacement, (unexpectedly of course) the onward trip from Adyar, with the jeep's roof top, straddled with complete camping gear, earned curious public attention, and proved a smooth and incident-free journey. We reached our destination at 21.30 Hrs., and were invited to spend the night in the Forest Rangers Quarters (consisting of 3 rooms with attached baths, glazed tile flooring, running water facility but devoid of electricity) by the F.D. personnel.

After a sumptuous supper (that included curd rice, vegetables and fruit), we did a bit of sky-gazing. The charming moon and the shiny bright stars of that clear blue night sky, was akin to smooth shining diamonds dotting a maiden's

neck.... Together, with the constellation Little Bear, the celestial bodies were truly a bliss to behold. One of us (V.M.P) even instantly composed a few quatrains, in appreciation.

Dawn of Easter mom, revealed a transformation of the sky into a canvass of golden hues - a perfect piece of nature's kaleidoscope for the artist of natural scenes, or is it for camera buffs? Snores forgotten and peace made, over an assorted breakfast (comprising vegetables, bread, butter, jam, cheese and biscuits) and cups of strong tea, we drove to the sanctuary proper 0.7 kms away. We were treated to a film show on the pelicanry (that was very informative) along with a few tourists from Russia, at the Environmental Education Centre (EEC). This was followed by a survey of the museum exhibits. Serious birding along the bunds began from 8:45 hrs. The table lists the birds and numbers recorded as on 30th March '97.

Sl. No.	Species	Adults	Chicks	Total
01	Grey pelican	795	120	915
02	Openbill stork	686	265	951
03	White ibis	86	35	121
04	Lesser cormorant	3198	247	3445
05	Night heron	114	68	182
06	Coot	42	36	78
07	Dabchick / little grebe	54	22	76
08	Indian moorhen	36	17	53
09	Shoveller	58	-	58
10	Pintail	16	-	16
11	Spotbilled duck	42	-	42
12	Garganey teal	102	-	102
13	Tufted pochard	112	-	112
14	Common pochard	44	-	44
15	Black-winged stilt	58	-	58
16	Large egret	41	-	41
17	Cattle egret	116	36	152
18	Little egret	219	118	337
19	Whiskered tern	24	-	24
20	Grey heron	36	-	36
21	Spoonbill	4	-	4
22	White-breasted kingfisher	2	-	2
23	Painted stork	6	-	6
24	Darter / snakebird	4	-	4
25	Purple moorhen	4	-	4
26	Indian shag	4	-	4
27	Wood sandpiper	32	-	32
Total Population =		5935	+ 964	= 6899

Significance

NBS attains significance both as a pelicanry and as a breeding or roosting site for a variety of birdlife. The following factors are responsible for selection of this refuge by the birds:

01. The availability of a large fresh-water tank.
02. The presence of nesting / roosting *Barringtonia acutangula* trees, which tolerate long periods of inundation of the tank bed and foreshore areas. The trees in the tank offer protection to the birds and their chicks, from predators.
03. Both the birds and villagers are benefited from a sort of symbiotic relationship - the birds are protected by the villagers and they in turn get bird guano in the tank water, which is an excellent fertilizer for their agricultural crops, cultivated in the adjoining fields.
04. The nearby Pulicat lake is an inexhaustible source of food for the birds all year round.
05. The Reserve Forest area surrounding the Nelapattu tank provides the birds with the nesting material, essential for breeding.

Fauna & Flora

Mammals like jackal, slender loris, spotted deer, black-naped hare, common mongoose, bonnet macaque, bats, squirrels, palm civet, jungle cat, field rats, mice, water buffaloes and domestic cattle have been recorded in the RF area. Snakes such as rat snake, vine snake, bronze-backed tree snake, striped-keel back water snake, Indian spectacled cobra and the saw-scaled viper are seen. Monitor lizards, garden lizards, common skink, gecko and freshwater terrapins are also here. Insect life is diverse especially butterflies and moths, yet not thoroughly investigated. The flora in the RF area is of the southern dry evergreen scrub type, comprising of *Manilkara hexandra*, *Naba buxifolia*, *Mernecylon edule*, *Buchanania angustifolia*, *Terminalia bellerica*, *Zizyphus xylopyrus* and *Acacia leucophloea*, to name a prominent few. There is tremendous scope for further research into the botanical and zoological parameters of this sanctuary. Over 115 species of birds have been recorded from NBS.

Facilities for Visitors

For the education of the tourist, sign boards are displayed about individual birds on the bunds. The Environmental Educational Centre serves as an interpretation complex, consisting of a museum, library and an auditorium with audio-visual facilities. Benches and hides are provided on the bunds, which enable visitors to view the birds in comfort. A few binoculars are provided along with bird brochures. A bird guide also accompanies visitors and explains the birdlife of the sanctuary. Drinking water facility at more points, a watch tower, boundary demarkation and protection of the sanctuary area by RCC posts and chain link fence, strengthening and planting of Babul trees on the bunds and planting of *Barringtonia* trees

in the tank bed, are proposed developments. On the whole, the clean maintenance of the sanctuary and the enthusiasm shown by the staff was much appreciated by us. The sanctuary is managed by the Divisional Forest Officer, Wildlife Management Division Sullurpet 524 121, A.P., Tel. No. 62158

Suggestions

Having visited the sanctuary for many years, we have found that planting of *Barringtonia* saplings (presently 250 in the nursery) have not been very successful. During the late M. Krishnan's visit with ANJ in 1976, there were 119 *Barringtonia acutangula* trees in the main tank and 40 trees in the small tank. Now, there are only 39 big trees in the main tank and about 60 saplings of 3-4 ft. high in the small tank. Therefore ANJ suggests the transplanting of full grown trees from the nearby areas, as was done in Vedanthangal Bird Sanctuary (Madras) in the 1970's which proved successful.

Similarly, 'S' - shaped islands 100 ft. long should be created so that the birds can effectively corner the fishes in the semi-circles thus created. This will be of great benefit to the birds newly taken to the water. A dormitory may be built to enable tourists from far, to stay in the sanctuary for a few days. This may be built near the staff quarters. This can provide additional job opportunities for the nearby villagers.

Vedurupattu Painted Stork Refuge

About 12 km south-west of NBS, is the painted stork Sanctuary, located in Vedurupattu village. We spent a good one hour watching the storks with chicks in nests, built on a variety of trees. Two 5 - week old chicks were hand-raised by the villagers on fish. It was a joy to feed them ourselves. Measurements were taken, for reference. There are 20 huts in the village, with a rough total of 150 people. The nesting trees of the birds, measured an average height of 30-40 feet. At the base of each tree, about 3 ft. high reinforcements of a mixture of cowdung cakes and earth, which spanned 10 ft. in diameter were seen. This was, to prevent guano from destroying the tree roots. The River Kalangi, adjacent to the sanctuary was almost dry at this time of the year. The following is the list of nesting trees and nests of the painted storks in Vedurupattu village.

Nesting Trees	No. of Trees	No. of Nests
<i>Mangifera indica</i>	2	19
<i>Azadirachta indica</i>	2	14
<i>Tamarindus indicus</i>	6	203
<i>Borassus flabellifer</i>	2	3
<i>Prosopis juliflora</i>	2	12
<i>Ficus benghalensis</i>	1	22
Total Nest Trees = 15		Total Nests = 273



Each nest on an average contained two adults (parent birds) and three chicks. Thus the total population numbered one thousand three hundred and sixty five painted storks. After taking photographs and wishing farewell to the villagers, we returned to Madras. Field glasses used during the present visit included a Berkut 7 x 35 (Russia), Super Zenith 7 x 35 and a Tasco 8 x - 16 x 40 zoom (both Japanese).

Acknowledgement

We are very grateful to Mr P Subramaniam (DFO), Mr K. Anjaiah (FRO, Additional Charge), Mr N. Adhiseshaiah (Forest Watcher), Mr M. Keshavulu (Bird Guide), Mr E. Nageshwar Rao (Forest Watcher) and Mr Nagaiah, (a tribal elder, who has been around since the inception of the Nelapattu Bird

Sanctuary in 1976), for all the help and hospitality rendered to us during all our visits. May their tribe increase.

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This appears to have been my year of the pelicans. In February 1997, I visited the huge salt pans of Tata Chemicals in Jamnagar District of Gujarat State, and saw a large number of both Dalmation and rosy pelicans, both species being winter visitors with us. Though the rosy does nest from time to time with the flamingoes in the Great Rann of Kachchh, both our wintering pelicans breed beyond the Himalayas and associated mountains and plateau. They are ground nesters among reeds, marshes or islands in salt lakes. Side by side on the salt pans, the Dalmations looked distinctly larger and more silvery white. The adult rosy showed a pink wash. Further identifications are the pink legs, yellow bill and very distinct black primaries contrasting with the white wings in the rosy against the dark upper mandible, slaty legs, less contrasting wing colouring. A couple of months earlier, a Dalmation had been found dead; it carried a band with Russian imprints. The matter had been reported in the Newsletter for Birdwatchers.

Later in June, I received a brochure from Mysore telling me about work being done by amateurs with the pelicans nesting at Kokre Bellur village off the Bangalore-Mysore highway. I wrote back and was invited to visit Mysore. We had decided to adopt one of the baby pelicans which fall off their nests and are hand fed by the volunteers. On my return from a September visit to the Himalayas I found an invitation for a workshop in Chennai at the M.S. Swaminathan Institute. I decided to avail of the opportunity to plan my trip in a manner that I could detour to Kokre Bellur and Mysore. Through life I have experienced a series of coincidences that are quite uncanny. My niece is married into the Ghorpade family of Sandur in Karnataka. She and her husband Kartik Ghorpade happened to drop in a few days prior to my departure to Chennai. We got talking about the Kokre Bellur pelicans and Kartik insisted I let him organise things since a friend of his

My Year of the Pelicans

LAVKUMAR KHACHAR

had a farm house near Mysore and so on Sunday 16th November, I was on the road to Mysore accompanied by young Shrinivas and Jagannath Reddy who were press-ganged by Kartik to chaperon me during my Karnataka sojourn. And so, as great storm clouds flashed lighting in the west, we drew up outside the pelican village.

From recent accounts, I began to have doubts if I was too early and so it was a relief to be told by a villager that four birds had arrived a couple of days earlier! He guided us to a large *Ficus religiosa* tree on the outskirts of the village where indeed the birds were present but instead of four, we counted over fifty and even as we watched several more flew in to join the visibly broody birds on the tree. This was the first time I have seen pelicans on trees and I was struck by the grave danger to the survival of these birds if large trees are cut. More immediate, it was clear that the congregations of a couple of hundred large birds joined by storks and other colonial nesters, would find it difficult to collect enough sticks for their nests - overcrowding and shortage of material are dangers as acute as are the dwindling supply of fish. Each year, these triple pressures will increase. Incidentally too, I was told the fish are themselves toxic, thanks to huge quantities of pesticides and inorganic manures used very liberally on paddy and sugar cane in the watershed of the Cauvery.

In Mysore next day I was happy to meet the young men who have taken on themselves the task of ensuring that the pelicans continue to nest at Kokre Bellur. The respect they gave me was heartwarming, their enthusiasm and dedication made me forget the decades where often I felt I was treading a futile journey. These serious idealistic young men were a far cry from the fashionable elite who mouth platitudes. I could not resist their eagerness to be shown the lake in the Mysore University campus. I am glad I went. It is a beautiful water body

any city should cherish. In the middle of the lake were some trees on which cormorants and white ibis had fully fledged young, and to our joy a couple of pelicans were settled down looking extremely broody. Later we counted over 15 birds serenely floating on the lake. Obviously, they were here to nest. Mysore city should take these grotesque big birds to heart and make them the attraction of their gracious city. Almost as though to imprint the pelicans on my subconscious, on my last morning in Bangalore the Deccan Herald carried a front page photograph of the Kokre Bellur Pelicans, reporting that the birds had arrived earlier than usual!

The South Indian pelicans are distinctly smaller than the northern birds, and even the adults are greyer or off white. In flight, the flight feathers have no black. Most distinctive is the brown on the nape and down the back of the neck. As for the black spots on the upper mandible from which the name spotbilled pelican is derived, I could not make them out. A better name would be grey or brown-naped pelican.

On getting back to Gandhinagar, among the mail was a letter from Taej Mundkar writing about his having visited a Dalmation pelican nesting colony on Lake Balkash in Kazakhstan, Central Asia, and a copy of "Black Buck" the journal of the Madras Naturalists' Society with an illustration of spotbilled pelican on its cover! The photograph, I note, is taken by a young naturalist of great promise - V. Santharam, who took me birdwatching years ago on the Adyar in then Madras. As a boy he wrote very readable pieces in the N.L. - that is how I got to know about him and went searching for him.

I end my year of the pelicans with a sight of 50 odd silvery white Dalmation pelicans *Pelecanus crispus* at the Tata Chemicals Saltpans. Even as we were leaving, a couple of groups were flying in on great spirally descending glides. Quite obviously they had arrived from across the gulf of Kutch to spend winter here. There are ring recovery evidences that these birds originate in a pelicanry on Lake Balkash in Kazakhstan (pers. comm. Taej Mundkur).



Laggar Falcons and Bonelli's Eagles in Pune

RAHUL PURANDARE, 18A, Kapila Society, Gokhale Nagar, Pune 411 016

Birds that hunt in pair

This time they caught two pigeons, V.S. Katke, my father's friend was complaining. "One of the two raptors caught one red pigeon from the flock of around thirty flying pigeons. We shouted and released the *khuttad* (a pigeon whose primary feathers are plucked and which is held in hand as a 'come down' signal to the flying domestic pigeons) and ran towards the victim. Meanwhile the other *lagad* (a bird of prey not necessarily the laggar falcon) carried away the unattended *khuttad*. I am helpless and have stopped the game. This is the fifth time within two weeks". Mr Katke was naturally very upset to lose his dear pigeons in his presence.

Although it was a sad story, I was very excited to have the opportunity to spot the bird that I had missed for the last few years in Pune. I was anxiously looking for the laggar falcons (*Falco biarmicus jugger*). Although Mr Katke was calling the 'culprit' by the term *lagad*, this as I have observed, is a very general term used, at least in Pune, to describe any bird of prey. When I asked him to describe it, he could only tell me that it is large, and white on the breast. I promised to visit his place on the condition that he would demonstrate the entire scenario, which he promised to do.

As per my promise to Mr Katke, my father and I reached his place on Pune-Sinhgad road on the evening of 11th April 1997. It was mainly land under agriculture with a water canal nearby. The place was not far away from the barren slopes of the hills adjacent to Sinhgad. Mr Katke who was eagerly waiting for us, told me that he had not released his pigeons

for the last few days as per my father's instructions. I was a little worried to know this as this could have forced the hunters to change their habit. He reassured me that sometimes a solitary bird and sometimes a pair attacks as soon as the pigeons make a couple of cycles in the air. He also told me that the birds always come from the north, from a place covered with 40 ft tall trees. He also added that since his pigeons are quite familiar with birds of prey flying around regularly, and especially due to the recent attacks, they have become fairly bold and would still show their willingness to take to the wing.

As soon as he released the flock I was waiting to see a pair of laggar falcons. Unfortunately, the flock circled again and again but nothing happened, and we decided to come the next day at the same time.

It was a wonderful evening and the weather was getting cloudy in the east, when we reached the place. Mr Katke opened the door of the loft, and released the pigeons. I was ready, expecting the falcons (?) to come from the north. As soon as the flock started making a third circle, a giant figure appeared on top of the eucalyptus tree. "That's it!" Mr Katke shouted. "The devil has come again!" I had never expected this character on the stage. It was a full grown Bonelli's hawk-eagle (*Hieraaetus fasciatus*). In a moment, the eagle intercepted a reddish brown pigeon and tried to catch it in its talons. I could not believe that the bird struck at a distance of not more than 50 ft from us, completely ignoring our shouts. But this time the pigeon was fortunate as two jungle crows came rushing at the eagle to the pigeon's rescue. The moment

the eagle saw the crows, it dropped the pigeon, and with two clumsy twists tried to escape. The flock split, just the way I had seen them do eleven years ago. The unsuccessful hunter started flying steadily towards the hills pursued by the crows. The drama was not yet over. Suddenly, a flock of a dozen blue rock pigeons started flying rapidly towards them. To my surprise the flock overtook the eagle and for a while it was in the centre of the flock but it attacked no pigeon, not even those below it. Although the eagle, irritated by crows, was not in a position to attack any of the pigeons, I wonder how the pigeons dared to pass the eagle so close. The eagle ultimately reached the hill where it started soaring high up in the air till the crows gave up their chase.

"This happens every time!" said Mr Katke counting the pigeons. "Although it could not catch any this time, normally two or three go away for ever!". One fortunate, but shocked, pigeon was back and it was shaking with fear.

This was a little disappointment for me since I could not spot laggars as I had hoped. I made several unsuccessful attempts to locate the eagle's perch and also to see whether there was a nesting pair. Here I would like to raise a question about the predators' preference for a red or a distinctly coloured pigeon from a flock. Many times it has been observed that colourful homers do not return home when released from far away. Do raptors have a stronger attraction towards multicoloured birds? Burton does not refer to this aspect of the dependence of some raptors on domestic birds for food.

The Bonelli's hawk-eagle is a breeding resident near Pune, and I remember having seen it catching a hare long back. I have also seen it hunting in a pair in its breeding season. I do not know if it hunts in pairs during the rest of the period. Watve M.G. *et al*, have closely observed a nesting pair of Bonelli's hawk-eagle near Pune for a considerable period. They say that the nesting activities start in November and a pair is seen along with fledgeling/s till June around the nest. This leaves a very small period of roughly four months (in the rainy season in Maharashtra) for observing their activities during the non-breeding season. More interestingly, they have also claimed, on time and energy considerations, that hunting separately is a much more beneficial strategy than hunting in pairs, and still the birds prefer to hunt in pairs, probably to maintain the bond between them. Cheating has also been observed when one bird takes advantage of the hunting skills of the other. Lavkumar and Dharmakumarsinhji have described beautifully the hunting techniques of a nesting pair of Bonelli's hawk-eagle. Its smaller cousin, the booted hawk-eagle (*Hieraaetus pennatus*) is commonly found in and around Pune, single as well as in pairs, in winter during its migration. Although it has been reported to hunt in pairs during its nesting period in NW where it has also been described as a regular chicken-lifter, I have never seen it doing the same during its migration.

To me, the laggar's story is mysterious. In Pune, I remember seeing a pair regularly till 1990-91. Why the bird

has almost disappeared is unknown. The handsome falcon was a regular visitor till a few years ago, and it was a great nuisance to the pigeon men. Although I have known an incidence of shooting it, it is not the prime reason for its decline, as it would have been the same story for the Bonelli's hawk-eagle which seems to be an equal menace to lofts and poultry. Apparently, there is no distinct fluctuation observed in the eagle's population. Destruction of the falcon's habitat and cutting of big trees which were the potential nesting sites for falcons and merlins, are probably reasons for its fall. My last sighting of this magnificent falcon near Pune, was at Bhira (50 km to the west of Pune) in April 1994 when I saw a pair circling on the top of the river bed. At least they had found a peaceful place to live!

Pune city has undergone a complete change especially within the last 7-8 years. More and more land is coming under construction, and some under cultivation. Lots of trees are being chopped down especially on the highway and outskirts. Most of the eagles including the Bonelli's hawk-eagle have their nesting sites still away from the city, but they are facing a great danger in the coming 2-3 years considering the rate of expansion of the city. I know the case of a tawny eagle (*Aquila rapax*) nesting near Bhugaon (15 km to the west of Pune) which had to abandon its nest last year as it was disturbed by road building activities. The only known breeding pair in Pune of the mottled wood owl (*Strix ocellata*) abandoned its home near the Pune-Sinhgad road because of the construction of a heavy fly-over bridge. My friend Shrikant Ingalhallikar had known a nesting site of the laggar falcon near Katraj (8 km to the south of Pune) where at present an engineering college stands. It was no different story for the collared scops owl (*Otus bakkamoena*) that was never seen in Pune after it lost its roosting tree at Sinhgad. This changing environment has however led to an increase in the population of some species, but decrease in others especially the raptors including laggars. If some effective measures are not taken, the laggar falcons will be gone forever.

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Observations on the Vocalizations and Display of the Broadtailed Grass Warbler (*Schoenicola platyura*) (Jerdon)



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The broadtailed grass warbler, the sole representative of the genus *Schoenicola* within Indian limits, is one of our little-known endemic species. This sprightly bird has a characteristic broad, graduated tail and a song reputed to be "the best song of any of our warblers" (Nichols, in Ali & Ripley 1983). It is a rare and patchily distributed species occurring between 900 and 2000 m in the hills of the Southern Western Ghats from about Belgaum south to the Ashanbu hills. Its occurrence in Sri Lanka is poorly known and rests on a few doubtful records.

During April-May 1997, I was fortunate to observe these birds in the Muthukuli-Kodeyar area of the Kalakad-Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve. Several individuals and pairs were observed in the moist valleys and slopes covered with grass, sedges, scattered shrubs and bamboo, in broken terrain, on the periphery of the Kodeyar reservoir. On 10th April, I observed several birds between 1445 and 1600 hrs, on a cool, cloudy afternoon, and especially the pair of which I made detailed notes on calling and display behaviour as described below.

Vocalizations

I began observation of the pair at 1445 hrs in a wide, level marshy depression covered by grass and sedges about a foot tall, with a small rivulet running through. During the first 15 minutes, one individual was observed singing. The song can be described as a soft, rapid sibilant 'pis' or 'psit' repeated six or seven times followed quickly by 1-3 sharp 'pseer' or 'churr' notes and a drawn-out 'pseeu' with some variations thus: 'psit-psit-psit-psit-psit-psit churr churr, pseeu'. The individual delivered this song from atop a sedge and I was able to watch it on its prominent perch from 20 to 30 m away. It repeated the song at irregular intervals, occasionally flying up 2-3 metres singing, then dived back into the grass to another perch. While landing, the tail was fanned open displaying clearly the black-and-white graduated underside. While it sang, the black gape was clearly visible (the colour of the gape is variable, perhaps due to seasonality).

At 1500 hrs, the other individual began calling from nearby. Its call was very different — a sharp, single note: 'chit' or 'tilt' (possibly the 'pink' call described by Ali & Ripley 1983). This call-note is emitted about once per second (I timed 18 calls in 20 s) with an accompanying flick of the wing and tail. Unlike the first bird, this individual was calling from amidst the clumps of grass and sedges. From the differences in behaviour and the observation that the tail of the former was slightly longer, I assumed that they were male and female, respectively. This requires, further confirmation.

Display

Soon after the 'female' began calling, the 'male' flew towards it, perched 2-3 m away, and continued singing. It then

fanned open its tail wide, half-opened its wings, raised the feathers of its back (mantle), and with beak open slightly (showing black gape) slowly approached the female. The approach was a mouse-like walk through the grass and sedges, with a few hops to cover the few extra inches. When the male had approached very near, the female flew to a spot 5-6 m away. The male immediately followed the female and repeated the display and song. It then walked around the perched female (at 3-4 m distance) with tail slightly fanned open. While doing this, the male also opened its mouth briefly 2 or 3 times without vocalising showing the black gape, but this display did not appear to be pointed directly at the female. At 1520 hrs the female again moved away followed by the male.

Other notes

The activities of the above pair were suddenly interrupted at 1525 hrs when a buzzard (unidentified *Buteo* sp.) flew low over the area. Both birds stayed in dense cover for over 5 minutes, hidden and silent, and also moved unobtrusively about 10 m apart. The female resumed calling at 1530 from an exposed perch and also during its flitting "top-heavy" flight up into the air and down again into cover. The male did not resume singing until 1545 hrs. A cursory search for nests was made in the observation area but was unsuccessful. As I left the area, I observed two other pairs in the vicinity likewise with one bird of each pair singing and the other emitting the single note call. A similar observation was made of a pair during a visit in May 1997.

The breeding season of the broadtailed grass warbler is not well known and it has been suggested that the species is double-brooded (March-May and July-September). It is likely, therefore, that the above observations are related to the breeding activities and behaviour of the warblers. On the basis of the above observations, it is suggested that (i) the sexes may differ in their calls and calling behaviour, (ii) the 'male' has a distinct display that shows off its tail feathers, and gape to best effect and (iii) the black colouration of the gape may have a role in the display of the 'male'.

Acknowledgements

These observations were made during my research on rainforest bird communities in Kalakad-Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve which is supported by funds from the Ministry of Environment & Forests, India. I am grateful to the Tamil Nadu Forest Department for research permits.

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Birds of Jaldapara Wildlife Sanctuary

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Jaldapara Wildlife Sanctuary, one of the oldest, is located in the Duars region of West Bengal nestling under the foothills of Bhutan. The lofty snow ranges of the Himalayas loom large in the background. Due to the untiring efforts of E.O. Shebbeare, the then Head of the Bengal Forest Service, it became a Game Sanctuary in 1941 and later a Wildlife Sanctuary in 1976. The Sanctuary situated in Jalpaiguri district is 128 kms from Siliguri on the Siliguri-Guwahati highway. Covering 216.51 sq kms it is shaped like a pair of trousers with a waist of maximum width of 4 kms and the narrowest width of 500 metres, and each leg is about 18 kms long. Earlier the Torsa river was flowing on the western leg of the Sanctuary while the eastern leg was being drained by a mountain stream Malangi. After the 1968 floods, the Torsa changed its course flowing through the eastern leg merging with Malangi. A number of rivulets Hollong, Chiraphowa, Kalijhora, Sissamara, Bhaluka and Bidi Torsa traverse through the Sanctuary making the ecology of the forest riverine. The other forest type is savanna, dry and moist deciduous forest. The river bed of Torsa, in its former course, has changed into an alluvial savanna and grassland which supports tall grasses like *Themeda arundinacea*, *Saccharum* species, *Imperata cylindrica*, *Arundo donax* etc., the favourite fodder of the rhino. There are 71 species of grass including *Typha latifolia* and Napier grass and 514 species of trees, shrubs and herbs. As the soil is rich Sheesham (*Dalbergia sissoo*), Khair (*Acacia catechu*) and Semal (*Bombax ceiba*) started coming up threatening the grassland ecosystem. Paradoxically the authorities are fighting against nature to protect nature namely the vital grassland. The usurping trees such as Sheesham, Khair and Semal are cut and removed at the sapling stage or pole stage. This operation aimed at 'canopy opening' is one of the management practices adopted. High humidity in the sanctuary is ideal for the growth of weeds like *Lantana camara*, *Eupatorium* and *Miconia chordata* which overwhelm the grassland vegetation. Hence these are slashed and burnt paving way for the new grass to come up.

The forest on the western side consists of Sheesham, Semal, Siris (*Albizia procera*), Khair, Kumbi (*Yellow Silk cotton*) and Bauhinia species while the forest on the eastern side comprises thick Sal (*Shorea robusta*) connected to Chilapata forest range. The common shield fern (*Dryopteris filixmas*), a pteridophyte is in profusion encompassing the forest floor while the thick undergrowth consists of herbs, shrubs, creepers and tall grass. The towering Sal trees are wreathed in creepers particularly *Miconia chordata*, an obnoxious weed. There are a number of gymnosperms (*Cycas*) and epiphytic orchids, the most common being *Vanda roxburghii* and *Dranaria quercifolia*.

The great diversity of vegetation and the network of rivers and rivulets have made this sanctuary a home for a rich variety of avifauna. According to Sri Sen Gupta, Asst Wildlife Warden,

the sanctuary contains about 240 species of birds. Since the access to a large part of the sanctuary is only by elephant, birding is confined to the vicinity of Hollong lodge, banks of Hollong river and the Peacock avenue. However I and the other members of the BNHS Nature camp did a bit of birding sitting on elephant back. The birds observed are listed below.

[Scientific names of birds as in Pittie and robertson]

Family : PHALACROCORACIDAE

- | | | |
|---|------------------|----------------------------|
| 1 | Little Cormorant | <i>Phalacrocorax niger</i> |
|---|------------------|----------------------------|

Family : ARDEIDAE

- | | | |
|---|--------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1 | Little egret | <i>Egretta garzetta</i> |
| 2 | Pond heron or paddy bird | <i>Ardeola grayii</i> |

Family : ACCIPITRIDAE

- | | | |
|---|----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1 | Crested serpent eagle | <i>Spilornis cheela</i> |
| 2 | Honey Buzzard | <i>Pemis pitlorhyncus</i> |
| 3 | Indian whitebacked vulture | <i>Gyps bengalensis</i> |
| 4 | Palla's fishing eagle | <i>Haliaeetus leucoryphus</i> |
| 5 | Crested hawk eagle | <i>Spizaetus cirratus</i> |

Family : PHASIANIDAE

- | | | |
|---|-----------------|----------------------|
| 1 | Common Peafowl | <i>Pavo crisatus</i> |
| 2 | Red Jungle Fowl | <i>Gallus gallus</i> |

Family : COLUMBIDAE

- | | | |
|---|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1 | Red turtle dove | <i>Streptopelia tranquebarica</i> |
| 2 | Spotted dove | <i>Streptopelia chinensis</i> |
| 3 | Little brown dove | <i>Streptopelia senegalensis</i> |
| 4 | Imperial pigeon | <i>Ducula badia</i> |
| 5 | Thickbilled green pigeon | <i>Treron curvirostra</i> |

Family : PSITTACIDAE

- | | | |
|---|----------------------|----------------------------|
| 1 | Alexandrine parakeet | <i>Psittacula eupatria</i> |
| 2 | Roseringed parakeet | <i>Psittacula krameri</i> |

Family : ALCEDINIDAE

- | | | |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 | Common kingfisher | <i>Alcedo atthis</i> |
| 2 | Whitebreasted kingfisher | <i>Halcyon smymensis</i> |

Family : MEROPIIDAE

- | | | |
|---|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 | Small green bee-eater | <i>Merops orientalis</i> |
|---|-----------------------|--------------------------|

Family : CAPITONIDAE

- | | | |
|---|--|---------------------------|
| 1 | Great hill barbet or
Himalayan great barbet | <i>Magalaima virens</i> |
| 2 | Bluethroated barbet | <i>Megalaima asiatica</i> |

Family : UPUPIDAE

- | | | |
|---|--------|-------------------|
| 1 | Hoopoe | <i>Upupa epos</i> |
|---|--------|-------------------|

Family : PICIDAE

- | | | |
|---|--|---------------------------------|
| 1 | Lesser goldenbacked woodpecker | <i>Dinopium bengalense</i> |
| 2 | Mahratta woodpecker or yellowfronted pied woodpecker | <i>Dendrocopos mahrattensis</i> |

Family : LANIIDAE

- | | | |
|---|---------------------|-------------------------|
| 1 | Rufousbacked shrike | <i>Lanius schach</i> |
| 2 | Grey shrike | <i>Lanius excubitor</i> |

Family : ORIOLIDAE

- | | | |
|---|--------------------|---------------------------|
| 1 | Blackheaded oriole | <i>Oriolus xanthornus</i> |
|---|--------------------|---------------------------|

Family : DICRURIDAE

- | | | |
|---|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1 | Black drongo or king crow | <i>Dicrurus macrocercus</i> |
|---|---------------------------|-----------------------------|

Family : STURNIDAE

- | | | |
|---|-----------------|-----------------------------|
| 1 | Common myna | <i>Acridotheres tristis</i> |
| 2 | Pied myna | <i>Stumus contra</i> |
| 3 | Greyheaded myna | <i>Stumus malabaricus</i> |

Family : CORVIDAE

- | | | |
|---|-----------------|------------------------------|
| 1 | Jungle crow | <i>Corvus macrohynchos</i> |
| 2 | Indian tree pie | <i>Dendrocitta vagabunda</i> |

Family : CAMPEPHAGIDAE

- | | | |
|---|-----------------|---------------------------------|
| 1 | Scarlet minivet | <i>Pericrocotus flammeus</i> |
| 2 | Small minivet | <i>Pericrocotus cinnamomeus</i> |

Family : IRENIDAE

- | | | |
|---|-------------|-------------------------|
| 1 | Common lora | <i>Aegithina tiphia</i> |
|---|-------------|-------------------------|

Family : PYCNONOTIDAE

- | | | |
|---|---------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1 | Redvented bulbul | <i>Pycnonotus caler</i> |
| 2 | Redwhiskered bulbul | <i>Pycnonotus jocosus</i> |
| 3 | Blackheaded yellow bulbul | <i>Pycnonotus melanicterus</i> |
| 4 | Black Bulbul | <i>Hypsipetes leucocephalus</i> |

Family : MUSCICAPIDAE**Sub-Family : Timalinae**

- | | | |
|---|------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1 | Himalayan whistling thrush | <i>Myiophonus caeruleus</i> |
| 2 | Slatyheaded scimitar babbler | <i>Pomatorhinus horsfieldii</i> |

Sub-Family : Muscicapinae

- | | | |
|---|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1 | Tickell's blue flycatcher | <i>Cyornis tickelliae</i> |
|---|---------------------------|---------------------------|

Sub-Family : Sylviinae

- | | | |
|---|--------------|--------------------------------|
| 1 | Reed warbler | <i>Acrocephalus scirpaceus</i> |
|---|--------------|--------------------------------|

Sub-Family : Turdinae

- | | | |
|---|----------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1 | Blue rock thrush | <i>Monticola solitarius</i> |
| 2 | Magpie-robin or dhyaal | <i>Copsychus saularis</i> |
| 3 | Shama | <i>Copsychus malabaricus</i> |
| 4 | Collared bush chat or Stone chat | <i>Saxicola torquata</i> |

Family : SITTIDAE

- | | | |
|---|------------------------|------------------------|
| 1 | Velvetfronted nuthatch | <i>Sitta frontalis</i> |
|---|------------------------|------------------------|

Family : MOTACILLIDAE

- | | | |
|---|--------------|--------------------------|
| 1 | Grey wagtail | <i>Motacilla cinerea</i> |
|---|--------------|--------------------------|

Family : PLOCEIDAE**Sub-Family : Passerinae**

- | | | |
|---|---------------|--------------------------|
| 1 | House sparrow | <i>Passer domesticus</i> |
|---|---------------|--------------------------|

Sub-Family : Estrildinae

- | | | |
|---|---------------|----------------------------|
| 1 | Spotted munia | <i>Lonchura punctulata</i> |
|---|---------------|----------------------------|

Sri Sen Gupta informed us that the Bengal florican, a rare bird (*Eupodotis benghalensis*) was spotted in 1995 in Torsa block. Small groups of mergansers (Eastern) or goosanders (*Mergus merganser*), which are winter visitors to North India are reported to have been observed near the rapid streams in the Sanctuary while ruddy shelduck or brahminy duck were seen on the shingle banks of Torsa river. The notable resident birds noticed were blacknecked and lesser adjutant storks, red-flanked bush-robin and the great sand piper and the lesser sand piper.

FACT FILE OF JALDAPARA WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

- | | | |
|---|----------------------|--|
| 1 | Location : | Duars region, North of West Bengal. |
| 2 | Altitude : | 160-230 feet above sea level. |
| 3 | Temperature : | December, 12°C; April 23°C. |
| 4 | Best time to visit : | December-April. |
| 5 | How to reach : | Nearest Airport : Hasimara (5 kms)
Nearest Railhead : Madarihat (1 km)
Hasimara (5 kms) Road : 128 kms from
Siliguri on Siliguri- Guwahati Highway.
Siliguri is 5 kms away from
New Jalpaiguri Rly Station. |
| 6 | Accommodation : | Hollong Forest Lodge (Western side)
Bordbari Forest Lodge (Eastern side). |
| 7 | Boarding : | Available in both the lodges. |
| 8 | Transport : | Private and public transport available from
Siliguri. Within the Sanctuary elephants are
available on payment. |
| 9 | Whom to Contact : | Division Forest Officer, Wildlife Division II,
P.O. Jalpaiguri, West Bengal. |



Bird Migration and Flight Safety over Israel

YORAM YOM-TOV, Department of Zoology, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv 69978, Israel

Israel is located at the junction of three continents, between the Mediterranean Sea and the Arabian Desert. As a result, Israel is a "bottleneck", into which all or a large part of the world populations of certain soaring bird species concentrate on their way to their winter quarters in Africa, during both spring and autumn. In addition, many smaller birds migrate through Israel. It has been estimated that the total number of birds passing through Israel during the autumn migration is about 600 million, which is about 10% of the number of birds migrating from the Palearctic region to Africa. The combination of its unique location and small size, facilitates studying a number of basic migratory phenomena. The only other similar site in the world is Panama.

The concentration of an extremely large number of birds in the limited air space over Israel (the total area of Israel, including the West Bank is about 27,000 km²), creates a severe flight safety problem for Israel Air Force aircraft and their pilots. Most damage is caused by collision with medium and large size birds, such as raptors, storks and pelicans. An analysis of damage caused by birds between 1972-1983 showed that hundreds of accidents had occurred. Many of these were serious (damage exceeding one million dollars), several aircraft crashed and pilots killed. 74% of the accidents occurred during migration months. Total losses reached tens of millions of dollars.

In order to examine the possibility of decreasing losses and damage, a research project was initiated, aiming to examine if there is any yearly or seasonal regularity in the number of birds passing over, times of passage and length of passage time, heights of flight and routes over Israel. The possibility of regularity in daily and seasonal migration routes and altitudes was also checked as well as migration velocity. The influence of various climatic and biological factors on this system was studied.

Five different methods were used for gathering data :

- 1 **Ground Observers Network** : Ground observers were placed along a broad front across the country (75 km), during several migration seasons. More than 150 experienced birdwatchers logged about 224,000 observation hours.
- 2 **Motorised Glider** : This method enabled constant flying, upto 11.5 hours, with the same flock, as well as exact mapping of the migratory route, altitude, flock progress rate, climbing and gliding in thermals. 173 flights totaling about 720 hours were carried out.
- 3 **Light Aircraft Tracking** : This method proved excellent for locating principal migration routes, their altitudes and counting flocks. Twenty-nine flights totaling 84 hours were carried out.
- 4 **Unmanned Aircraft (Drones)** : This method enabled tracking single flocks for about 150 km with constant

documentation of the flock by video camera. Nineteen flights were carried out.

- 5 **Radar** : A radar screen at the Ben-Gurion International Airport approach radar was permanently available during all migration seasons. This enabled constant tracking during all hours of the day. A total of 8125 radar tracking hours were carried out. The combination of five methods for data gathering enabled complimenting the deficiencies of each method, and confirmation of data gathered by one method by others.

Large amount of data were gathered during this study, and after following the migration patterns for four years (eight migration seasons) the following information was available :

- 1 The magnitude of migration, including detailed information on the number of birds of all medium and large size raptors, white storks and pelicans which pass through Israel.
- 2 The timing of arrival and departure of each species, on daily and seasonally scales.
- 3 The routes taken by migrant birds, including heights of thermals used by each species.
- 4 The effect of weather, mainly winds, on the deflection of migratory birds from the main flying routes.

These results are very valuable for studying various biological phenomena as well as for flight safety. The results have been applied in the Israel Air Force since the early 1980s; a new term was coined in Air Force "Bird Plagued Zone" (BPZ). After the principal migration routes and their altitudes were determined, BPZ maps were printed and on them specific flight regulations on how pilots should plan their flights, as well as where and when it is forbidden to fly at low altitudes. The maps were distributed to all flight squadrons.

During the migration seasons, certain periods of time have been defined as closed for flight, according to movements of the migrating birds. Thus, fighter aircraft may fly at low altitudes, at least over certain parts of the country. At the Ben-Gurion International Airport radar a "bird centre" has been established, which methodically passes on real-time information to the Israel Air Force on flock locations, as well as continuous instructions to Air Force bases on the positions of flocks flying above or nearby them. At the same time all data on migrating flocks from the ground observers, aircraft, glider and radar are received at the centre.

On days when there is low magnitude migration, real-time permission is given for low altitude flights, thus enabling the Air Force to carry out low altitude military exercises even at the height of the migration season.

A review of collision data since the results of this research have been implemented in the Israel Air Force shows, that the percentage of collisions has decreased by 81.1% and the

yearly damage has decreased by 88%. Hence, the implementation of this system saves on average US \$40 million annually.

As a result of the information accumulated by this study, and widespread popular publication in Israel and abroad, Israel is now on the world tourist map as one of the best places for watching migrating birds. About 10,000 foreign and 35,000 Israeli birdwatchers arrive each year to watch migration.

An extensive educational system has been developed for schools and army units, which has significantly increased the public awareness to the subject of bird migration.

Future plans are for international cooperation in the implementation of flight safety procedures and free transfer of information between the participant countries (Jordan, Turkey and USA, and in the future also Egypt). A model for predicting migratory bird movements on a continental scale is now being developed in Israel, aiming to provide an early warning of several days.

(This is a summary of Dr. Yoram-Yom-Tov's slide presentation at Bangalore on 17th January '98)



CORRESPONDENCE

COMMENTS ON THE NEWSLETTER.

V. SANTHARAM, 68, 1 Floor, Santhome High Road, Chennai 600 028

In the Nov/Dec '97 issue of Newsletter, R. Suresh Kumar suggested that the hen harriers he saw in Kedamath Wildlife Sanctuary between 25 Nov. '96 and 28 March '97 could have been over-wintering birds and that this "could possibly be the first such record within Kedamath WLS."

I fail to understand what he means by "Over-wintering". Nov - March is usually the season one sees wintering species in the entire sub-continent. A bird is said to "over winter" when it stays behind in its wintering ground beyond the winter months - usually beyond April/May. What Suresh has seen is perfectly in conformity with the observations in the "Handbook". I hope contributors would be more careful while writing up their notes.

AASHEESH PITTIE, 8-2-545 Road No. 7, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad 500 034, India

The latest Newsletter (Vol. 37 No. 6, Nov/Dec 1997) arrived yesterday and I was thrilled by the wonderful cover photograph of the great horned owl at its nest! Such few photographs of Indian birds are published, that it might be a useful exercise if someone compiles a database of these photographs and the media they were published in. The uses of such a venture are many but one which strikes the mind immediately is for identification.

Like the brainfever bird's *ad nauseum* call, I must once again repeat my perhaps 'emotional' protest against publishing *culled* checklists. The purpose and the substance of any paper is taken away when this is done. I refer to C Susanthkumar's article in the above Newsletter. Do we have enough detailed distribution records to warrant this? I would rather prefer a reduction of articles or increase in the number of pages to accommodate checklists. I am not aware of a

published checklist of the birds of Shendurney Wildlife Sanctuary. Imagine a scenario where scientific data is required for an environmental assessment survey of this sanctuary as it is on the anvil for development projects. Will not a checklist of birds, or for that matter, any other life form, comprise baseline data for such an assessment? If it is not published in the only widely read media dedicated to birds, making it a permanent record, how will it be available for future use? You cannot allow 'lack of space' to over-ride this argument. This denial of information results in 3 different 'injured' parties. The readers, the author/s and the future generations. Readers should respond to the act. I already have a letter from a very disappointed contributor who sent a note for the last issue, *upon request*, and found that the checklist was not published at all. He wrote, "I think it a great shame not to include full checklists which give us a more complete picture of the state of the avifauna of a particular area and helps show us which area are in more need of protection. Part of the idea of having a publication like this is to disseminate information to as many interested parties as possible and not have to send out checklists individually".

- Maan Baruna's note (p. 99-100), regarding mis-identification of the Oriental white stork *Ciconia boyciana* in an earlier issue of the Newsletter brings up another such instance. A note by Kaushik Deut [NLBW 37(5): Back cover] identifying large cormorants *Phalacrocorax carbo* in breeding plumage as Japanese cormorants *Phalacrocorax capillatus*. Krys Kazmierczak wrote "I was flabbergasted! Of course the birds are *Phalacrocorax carbo* and the amount of white on the head is within the range of variation found in that species."
- The article by S. Thirumuthi, *et al.*, entitled 'Avian predators of honey bees and their management' would have been more interesting had some information been given on the effect of avian depredations on the bee-population and whether there was a change in the quantity of honey produced. Did avian predators hit the bottom-line of the apiary industry and how badly?
- R Suresh Kumar's note on hen harrier *Circus cyaneus* is of interest. First I must get the meaning of "over-wintering" correctly. I presume that the term means the birds remain

in an area throughout the winter and are not seen just when they arrive into the country and leave it (on passage). Identification of the male is easy but that of the female (or immature!) is difficult. From the meagre description of this bird, we cannot pin down the species. The hen harrier is the largest of the four *Circus* harriers which visit our sub-continent and their staple diet comprises more of larger prey than grasshoppers e.g., larks (*Alaudidae*). Why would grasshoppers be abundant in Kedarnath Wildlife Sanctuary when the author records the valley "remained snow bound from middle of January to late March," and most vegetation as withered away and dried, during the observation period? Was there an abundance of small birds which was overlooked?

To close with a tongue-in-cheek quote from page 109. "...a pitta smacked onto the wall of my grandfather's house, ...the house still exists." Wow!

With best wishes & regards



CHECKLISTS. SNEHAL PATEL, *Nature Club Surat, 81, Sarjan Society, Surat 395 007*

Your decision of not printing full checklist was unavoidable and welcome. Authors should be ready to supply checklist of their area.

The Newsletter was becoming full of checklists, Sept/Oct issue has five.

The other suggestion is we can have a bumper issue of the Newsletter which can be a checklist special issue once a year. This will be very useful to birdwatchers for carrying along with them for birdwatching in new areas.

Another alternative is to print checklists in single spacing as done in 'Birds of Erimalai' Sept/Oct issue. Also our Newsletter not being a scientific journal and the majority of readers are amateurs, the long reference list is not essential.

Aasheesh Pittie's 'Good use of our birding lists' (Sept/Oct) is a very good attempt and our readers should support him.



SIGHTING OF BLACKCAPPED KINGFISHER *Halcyon pileata* IN MELGHAT TIGER RESERVE, MAHARASHTRA. ASHISH KOTHARI, *Apartment 5, Shree Dutta Krupa, 908, Deccan Gymkhana, Pune 411 004, Maharashtra, India*

The blackcapped kingfisher *Halcyon pileata* is essentially a maritime bird, found along virtually the entire coastline of India, and in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The *Handbook* (Ali and Ripley 1983; 283) notes that it "penetrates much deeper inland along the larger rivers and their feeders" and has been seen sporadically in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, Assam, and Manipur. Not much is known, it appears, about its breeding in such inland areas.

On the morning of 29th January, 1998, I observed an individual blackcapped kingfisher in Melghat Tiger Reserve, Vidarbha region, Maharashtra (over 500 km from the coast as the crow flies). The bird was sitting on a branch overlooking the river below Kholkaz Rest House.

The species has apparently been sighted only twice before in Melghat (January to April in 1995 and again in the same period in 1996), both times by Prachi Mehta of the Wildlife Institute of India. It may be interesting to observe the species more systematically in Melghat, to see if it nests there. Mehta (personal communication) notes that only two nesting records are reported from India, "one by Abdulali (1945) near Sharavaty river in Mysore and the other by Stewart from Travancore". Both these sites are much closer to the coast than Melghat. Since the breeding season starts in March, it may well be breeding here. Taej Mundkur of Wetlands International reports that ornithologists in South-East Asia have reported its food habits as being very diverse (dragonflies, water boatmen, bees, large wasps, beetles, grasshoppers and occasionally fish), which might explain why it survives far inland.

The local Range Officer at Melghat has volunteered to observe the site over the next few days and report if he continues to see the species. I would like to know from readers if they have any further information to add which could indicate the residential status of this species in Melghat (or, for that matter, in central India).

I also saw, at the same site, a pair of black storks *Ciconia nigra*, which are supposed to be rare in the Deccan Peninsula (Ali and Ripley 1983; 26). However, Kishore Rithe of the Amravati Nature Conservation Society, who was with me in Melghat (though not when I saw the above two birds), reports that he has seen them in larger numbers at wetlands in Amravati district. This may be worth following up.

Reference :

Ali, S. and Ripley, S. Dillon. 1983. *Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan: Compact Edition*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi.

Email communication from Prachi Mehta, Wildlife Institute of India (4 February, 1998), and Taej Mundkur, Wetlands International (9 February, 1998).



BAIKAL TEAL AT TILPARA BARRAGE, W.B. KAUSHIK DEUTI, ARUP HALDER, ALOKE DAS and D.K. BISWAS, Calcutta Wildlife Society, 9, Ishwar Ganguli Street, Calcutta 700 026

The Baikal teal (*Anas formosa*) is an internationally threatened species of migratory duck according to the 1990 IUCN Red Data Book. The species breeds only in marshes, lakes and rivers in the tundra of North Russia and moves to the northern part of East Asia in the non-breeding season. The

Field Guide to the Waterbirds of Asia mentions that it is considered to be endangered in all the eleven countries of Asia where it has been reported from, viz. Russia, Mongolia, China, North and South Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Vietnam, India and Pakistan. There are few records of this species from India and only one from West Bengal when two male ducks were recorded from Bailavpur WLS, Santiniketan on 18th January, 1993 (JBNHS 92(2): 262). During the annual mid-winter waterfowl census on 4th January 1998, we recorded 3 pairs of Baikal teal at Tailpara Barrage on Mayurakshi river near Suri, Birbhum district, W.B. This barrage is a major waterfowl habitat in West Bengal as about 500 bar-headed and greylag geese along with 300 ruddy shelducks, red-crested, tufted, white-eyed and common pochards besides garganey, gadwall and pintail ducks visit every winter. The presence of Baikal teal indicates the richness of this wetland in waterbird species diversity.



THE RED-FACED MALKOHA IN INDIA. T.W. HOFFMANN, Ceylon Bird Club, P.O. Box 11, Colombo, Sri Lanka

The reproduction of Baker and Inglis' (1930) treatment of the red-faced malkoha in the Newsletter, Vol.37(4), does not bring us nearer a solution of the question whether or not the species is found in India or whether it is strictly a Sri Lankan endemic, nor is it a new source of information (ref. my letter of 24.4.1997 to Lt General B C Nanda, with copy to Editor). Baker and Inglis merely follow Fauna of British India (1922-1931) where the inclusion of the species is based on Stewart's much doubted claim (see Ali & Ripley, Handbook Vol. 3 : 238). The only other report in well over 100 years is that by C H Biddulph (JBNHS 53: 697-8), which led to the tentative acceptance of the red-faced malkoha as an Indian bird in the Handbook. Biddulph's claim, on closer examination, cannot be sustained (see Hoffmann, JBNHS, Vol.93(3), Dec 1996).

To my knowledge there are in the literature no other reports of the occurrence of the red-faced malkoha in India.

In the absence of any details based on field notes, Lt General Nanda's tentative identification on the basis of a subsequent study of Baker and Inglis cannot be considered as evidence. It is not my wish to continue this correspondence in the Newsletter, but the quote from Baker and Inglis requires comment, if only to prevent any erroneous impression amongst those who have not studied the question. ■



SHIKRAS IN COORG. Lt Gen B.C. NANDA, Hebbettageri, K. Nidugane P.O., Madikeri 571 201

On 3rd Jan 1998 at about 0900 hrs a bird perched on a branch of a young Grevillea (silver oak) tree about 15 yards and 12 feet lower than my study desk.

It was a very windy morning and the sun had emerged having at last got the better of the morning mist. The bird sat facing me and the sun; giving me ample time to study it with

a pair of binoculars and all the while consulting the various books at my disposal. It sat in the same position for almost 40 minutes — the only movement being that of its head and eyes. It finally swooped down on some unwary prey and vanished into the trees. In spite of the doubt of it being a sparrow hawk, I was convinced that it was a shikra, *Accipiter badius* (Gmelin).

What is more today (8 Jan 1998) I saw three of these birds flying in the vicinity of my house at about 1040 hrs. The flight was typical, several rapid wing strokes followed by a glide. The rump or the upper tail-coverts appeared distinctly white in flight.



GDOSANDERS IN ASSAM. Dr D BAROOAH, Dass Pharmacy, Temple Road, Sibsagar 785 640, Assam

I read the note "Goosander, an addition to the Birdlife of Deepor Beel W.S." by Rathin Barman and P.C. Bhattacharjee published in the NLBW Vol.37(5). Goosanders are commonly seen in winter at the upper reaches of Manas river inside Manas NP (25°15' N x 91° E), at Bharalin river south of Nameri WLS and upper reaches of Brahmaputra at the Assam-Arunachal border. All these sites have high speed clear water suitable for goosander's characteristic feeding pattern.

I was at Mothanguri camp of Manas NP on 28th and 29th Nov '97. There the tourist lodge built over a hillock less than 1 km inside the Indo-Bhutan border faced the roaring Manas river curving out of the hills. It was a splendid sight with goosanders feeding. But we saw only 3 birds. The cause of this drastic fall in number is probably the activity of road building parallel to the river upstream in Bhutan since 2 yrs. The dynamiting and dislodging soft sandstones and granite boulders into the river has caused widespread death of fish, thereby drastically reducing the available food for aquatic birds including goosanders. Could it be that some of the missing birds came down south to Deepor Beel situated just 1° away from Manas?

The water at Deepor Beel is not as transparent as that of the sites mentioned above. However it has a good population of many species of fish. Unfortunately Barman and Bhattacharjee did not mention what exactly the birds were doing in that wetland. There are several important wetlands north & south of Brahmaputra in that geographical location regularly covered by midwinter waterfowl census. It will be interesting to know if any birdwatcher has noticed goosander in these sites in the recent past.



SWANS FOLLOW MICROLIGHT MOTHER HOME. sent by RAFI ALI, International Federation of Red Cross & Red Crescent Societies, 17, chemin des Crets, Petit-Saconnex, P.O. Box 372 CH-1211 Geneva 19

Trumpeter swans, America's largest waterfowl, were back in Chesapeake Bay yesterday for the first time in almost 200

years after three young birds had been tricked into migrating by a microlight aircraft they believed to be their mother, writes David Sapsted in New York. The swans completed their 110-mile migration from a wildlife reserve in Virginia to a farm lake on the eastern shore of the Maryland bay. Trumpeters disappeared from Chesapeake Bay because of over-hunting to meet the demand for quill pens, powder puffs and teathers for women's hats. The number in North America stands at about 19,000, all but 500 in migratory flocks in Alaska and Canada.

Courtesy : Telegraph



ERIC LOTT'S POSTCARDS ON BIRDS. BOB STEWART and TANYA BALCAR, Vattakanal Tree Nursery, P.O. Box 64, Kodaikanal 624 101

We are halfway to recovering the printing costs of the postcards. We expect the second half to go more slowly, but in time we are confident of a steady trickle of income. A little misunderstanding regarding the mistake in the postcards. Nothing wrong with the Frogmouths. It's the identity of the Nilgiri flycatcher. According to Krys (England, O.B.C.) the bird featured is in fact a white-bellied shortwing, *Brachypteryx* major sub-species *albiventris*. He says the mistake was quite understandable as the illustration in the Pictorial Guide is a composite of the two sub-species. Eric Lott was nevertheless quite distraught. He visits Kodai in February.



ASIAN KOELS (*EUDYNAMYS SCOLOPACEA*) FEED ON YOUNG FLOWERS OF PAPAYA PLANTS. ARUNAYAN SHARMA, N.S. Road, (in front of TOP) Malda 732 101, W.B.

On the morning of 25th December 1997, at around 0935 hrs, I observed a male Asian koel (*Eudynamis scolopacea*) eating the flowers of a papaya plant. I observed the koel for 15 minutes in my neighbouring garden. When the koel had just eaten two flowers, suddenly two house crows appeared on the plant, and the koel was evacuated by the crows. Generally most of the frugivorous birds used to feed on tender flowers of plants. This is with reference to the observation by K.S. Jose that Asian koels eat the tender parts of flowers of papaya plant.



REPORT TO MEMBERS OF THE INTERNATIONAL ORNITHOLOGICAL COMMITTEE. WALTER J BOCK, Columbia University in the city of New York, Dept of Biological Sciences, New York, NY 10027-7004, USA

The XXII International Ornithological Congress, Durban, South Africa, 16-22 August 1998 is less than a year away, and

it is time to provide you with necessary information about the congress and to request information from each of you. As you know the most important role of the IOC occurs during its meetings at the congress, and I hope that every IOC member will be able to attend the congress. President Peter Berthold and I look forward to seeing all of you at the Congress. Please contact either President Berthold or me if you have any questions about the IOC and/or future congresses. A full account of the past activities of the IOC, of the EC and other committees of the IOC will be provided to you at the IOC meetings at the XXII Congress.

- 1 We will have to fill a number of positions in the IOC at this congress, and would appreciate nominations of ornithologists from your country and any other countries, especially those not yet represented in the IOC. I should point out that a requirement for election to the IOC is attendance in at least one ornithological congress which can be the one at which the person is elected. Please remember that to be effective in the IOC, members must attend congresses, hence nothing is gained by electing members who are unable to attend congresses on a regular basis. If you would like to nominate anyone, please follow the following instructions from the Nominating Committee :

"Nominations are solicited for consideration of possible election to IOC membership at the forthcoming Congress in Durban, S.Africa. Nominations of women ornithologists and of ornithologists from underrepresented countries are particularly encouraged. Individuals may nominate themselves or someone else. Each nomination letter must include the mailing address, phone, FAX, and e-mail of the nominee, plus information about the IOC Congresses the nominee has attended (or will be attending in the case of the Congress in Durban). Nomination letters must be accompanied by 20 copies of the nominees' curriculum vitae, which at the least should indicate academic degrees held, positions held, publications, and/or contributions to ornithology of the nominee's country. Nomination letters and accompanying material should be submitted to: "Dr Cynthia Carey, Dept of EPO Biology, Univ of Colorado, Boulder, CO 80309, USA by 15 February, 1998."

Please copy the material to the Nominating Committee double sided to save paper and also postage. The CV and other material should be detailed, perhaps from 2-5 pages.

- 2 If there are any items which you would like to be placed on the agenda of the EC and IOC meetings, I would appreciate having this information sent to me well in advance of the congress. This includes any resolutions that you would like to propose for action by the IOC. Please include a full discussion for the reason you would like to have the item, including resolutions, discussed. Chair-persons of all Standing Committees are requested to be prepared to present a short summary of the work of their committee over the past four years, and to have a written report ready for publication in the proceedings. These reports can be as full and as detailed as desired as there should be no space restrictions in the proceedings. I would also appreciate it if

the chair-persons of the Standing Committees would provide me at the congress with the proposed composition of their committee for the 1998-2002 period. I will need names, addresses, telephone and fax numbers of proposed members. Any members of the IOC wishing to participate in the work of any of the Standing Committees or wish to propose members of these committees, should contact the chair-persons of these committees or me. If any members wish to organize a new Standing Committee, please contact me with the details as soon as possible. Any proposed amendments to the Statutes and By-laws must be signed by the necessary number of members of the IOC (see the published Statutes of By-Laws) and submitted to me as quickly as possible — immediately if not sooner. Two amendments to the By-Laws have been proposed, one proposing that nominees for the IOC must have attended at least one congress, and the other raising the statutory limit of members of the IOC.

- 3 At this moment no formal invitations for the 1998 congress have been submitted, but detailed discussions have been underway with two countries — China and Israel — who definitely plan to issue invitations. Any ornithologists interested in hosting the 2002 or the 2006 congress, should contact me immediately. I will provide you with a set of instructions and other information. If you are seriously interested in submitting an invitation for the 2002 congress, time is of the absolute essence. It would be best to arrange for a visit by me to your country to meet with ornithologists, to visit possible congress sites and to discuss the invitation and planning of the congress.



SUN BIRD — 'A SMALL WONDER' NESTING FOR ITS NEXT GENERATION. N.E. THYAGARAJ, *Regional Research Station, Mudigere 577 132*

On 30th January 1997, when I was on the way to my office at 8.15 am, I observed a pair of small sunbirds (*Nectarinia minima*) frequently uttering calls and busy on the hedge plant (*Lantana* sp.). I found that they were building a nest, so I began observing the birds.

Both male and female were sharing the work of nest building, but the male was more active and aggressive than the female. Both birds were bringing bits of fine thread of cotton, wool, hair every 1 or 2 minutes and fixing them perfectly within 10- 15 seconds. Every time the male arrived first and sat on the perching tree (*Erythrina*) near its nest, and gave a call Chee .. Chee .. ChickChick by turning its head on all sides. Later the female arrived and continued its building work. With this continuous building effort, a beautiful hanging nest was ready by the 4th day. On the fifth day (4.2.97) the female sat for egg laying. On 5.2.97 one egg, and on 6.2.97 another egg was laid (6th-7th days). Since the eggs were laid at the bottom of the hanging nest and as I did not want to disturb the nest I could not see the colour of the eggs. During the incubation

period, the female frequented the flowers of nearby plants 4-5 times in a day viz. cup and saucer (*Holmskioldia sanguinea*) pink flower (*Arabida magnifica*), dasavala (*Hibiscus* sp.), badalikke, a tree parasite (*Loranthus* sp.), and *Lantana* sp. which were surrounding its nest.

I observed two chicks, just hatched, naked and blind on 19.2.97. Therefore incubation lasted for 15 days. Both male and female were involved in parental care, and the male was more aggressive. Once it so happened that a Tickell's flowerpecker (*Dicaeum erythrorhynchos*) alighted on the *Loranthus*. The male was much excited and chased away the intruder.

It is very interesting that a nectar-feeding bird (*F. Nectariniidae*) nourishes its young with small *lepidopterous* larvae. This feeding habit of the small sunbird is sure to play a role in nature as a pollinator and destroyer of insect pests. Thus 'Moorthi Chikkadadaru Keerthi Doddadu' — as a Kannada proverb says, this bird can do a lot to maintain the health of the ecosystem.

The almost grown-up two chicks were peeping out from the entrance of the nest on 9th and 10th March 1997 i.e. fledging interval of 21 days. On 12th March 1997, I observed the young birds trying to puncture the nest at the lower end by making a hole in an attempt to come out, but they could not open it. The next day (13.3.1997) at 10.30 am the two chicks came out. The excited and restless parents remained close to their flying chicks. Finally the new generation birds flew away from the nesting site at 3.30 pm. The whole process was completed in about 43 days.

Acknowledgements

I acknowledge Dr A.K. Chakravarthy's help gratefully for creating my interest in birds.



OBSERVATIONS ON SOME BIRDS ON *FICUS BENGHALENSIS*. RAJIV SAXENA, *M.I.G.-853, Darpan Colony, Thatipur, Gwalior 474 011 (MP)*

During the first half of September 1992, I stayed at the Dak Bungalow at Jaura in the district of Morena, MP. In the compound there is a big *Ficus benghalensis*. It is common knowledge that these trees host a large number of birds and produce an ornithological treat at dawn and dusk.

At Jaura, the heavenly calm of dawn was disturbed either by the return of the great horned owl or by the departure of a grey hornbill. But the redvented bulbul was the first to twitter. After the owl and the hornbill had respectively arrived and departed, whitebacked vultures started to stretch their necks and open their wings. Two minutes later five vultures flew away one after another. Now the sun had arisen. Then began the hectic morning activities and high pitched chirping and singing of the Indian ring dove, little brown dove, crimsonbreasted

barbet, brahminy myna, roseringed parakeet, common myna, blue rock pigeon and common babbler. A pair of house crows saw the proceedings silently. After some time a little egret descended on the tree, and a pied crested cuckoo arrived.

The grey hornbill returned, and sitting just a foot away from a house crow on a higher branch, began to eat the figs. The crow and the hornbill stayed near each other for more than five minutes but neither of them showed any interest in the activities of the other.



200 SPECIES IN A DAY IN KAZIRANGA. MAAN BARUA, Wild Grass, Kaziranga, Assam 785 109

Kaziranga, one of India's best known parks, harbours 437 species of birds. This figure is more than 30% of the avifauna of the Indian sub-continent. The varied habitat present in the park makes it possible to see a number of species in a short period of time. An average day's birdwatching in the park yields eighty to ninety species. On 14th December 1993, while birdwatching with Sybil Sasoon in the eastern part of the park, we recorded a hundred and three species. However, we did not cover a large area and birdwatching was confined to three types of habitat only.

I am convinced that provided a broad range of habitat is covered it will be possible to see two hundred species in one day.



IDENTIFICATION OF NATURAL AREAS.. DR S THIRUMURTHI, Professor of Entomology, Forest College & Research Institute, Mettupalayam 641 301

Kindly refer to your editorial in NLBW, Vol.37(4) regarding the Identification of natural areas. I am interested in this concept and am willing to be associated with this venture. In this connection, I wish to inform you that I am associated with the Nilgiris Wildlife and Environment Association and working on the impact of habitat transformation on avian diversity. I also wish to coordinate with other ornithologists of this area and Tamilnadu. Please accept my participation in your programme and give details.

I also request you to inform us about the state of the Ornithological Society of India. We are very sad about the OSI since we could not hear anything for the past two years from our Secretary General, Dr Mrs Asha Chandola Saklani. As our President (of the OSI), please kindly do your best to revive the OSI.

[As I wrote in the NL earlier I have requested OSI to appoint a new President, as the communication gap between GARHWAL and BANGALORE has proved to be too wide. - Editor]



BIRDS ON OILPALM. A.K. CHAKRAVARTHY and S. NAGARAJU, University of Agricultural Sciences, Bangalore

Birds quickly learn to locate and pick-up fruits of their choice. If adapting to feed on a new food is a measure of success, then the crows and the parakeets are the most successful species. Only six years ago, Oilpalm (*Elaeis guineensis*) was introduced in Bhadra River command Area of Shimoga, Karnataka. Farmers began cultivating oilpalms in small areas (2 to 3 acres) even in urban and semi-urban areas. Animals that co-exist with humans like dog, country hen, crows, mynas and the parakeet found ways to feed on this nutritionally rich, attractive, golden maroon coloured fruits.

Mynas, crows and the parakeet have now started adapting to this new source, abandoning some of their traditional haunts and food items. These birds will continue feeding on palm fruits and in many areas of Shimoga, this will probably create conflict between birds and palm growers. But this is only a part of the equation. Introduction of oilpalm may change flocking and foraging patterns, associative feeding and roosting assemblages in birds.

Observations carried out on several oilpalm fields showed that house crow and jungle crow were the first to alight on a ripening oilpalm-fruit bunch. Crows began feeding on a year old palm fruit while the roseringed parakeet began feeding when palms were five years old i.e. when fruits are borne above 2m. The crows and the parakeet frequented plantations specifically to feed on fruits and attacked only healthy fruits. These were the dominant species and were the *Primary Feeders*.

Common myna, jungle myna and brahminy myna foraged in association with the crows and the parakeet and preferred to feed on fruits the crows and parakeet damaged. Mynas seldom foraged independent of the primary feeders. While the crows and the parakeet fed on palm fruits above, the mynas foraged on arthropods below. Mynas were the *Secondary Feeders*. The domestic hen gleaned on the mesocarp-bits of palm fruits fallen on ground and followed the primary and secondary feeders and was the *Tertiary Feeder*. The crow-pheasant, redvented bulbul and house sparrow at times pecked on damaged fruits and/or gleaned on ground and were categorised as *Tertiary Feeders*.

This hierarchical order and association of birds feeding on oilpalm is a dynamic process and the species assemblage keep on changing with the times and the locality. It will be interesting to study the bird community patterns of oilpalm and the mechanisms of adaptation as efforts are on to cultivate oilpalm in different parts of India. Understanding ecology and behaviour of bird communities will also help in developing management strategies for protection of oilpalm from birds. Currently, birds are causing economic losses in palm-fruit yields.



ANNOUNCEMENT

HANDBOOK OF THE BIRDS OF THE WORLD, VOL. 4

We are pleased to inform you that the fourth volume of the Handbook of the Birds of the World will be published, fully on schedule, this coming December 1997. Volume 4 (Sandgrouse to Cuckoos), will cover the sandgrouse, pigeons, cockatoos, parrots, turacos and cuckoos.

Some of these families are among the most diverse in the Class Aves. This volume deals with over 800 species, a substantially higher number than has been covered in any of the previous volumes and, as a result, there will be a record 70 large colour plates.

The Handbook of the Birds of the World is the first work ever to illustrate and deal in detail with all the species of birds in the world. The first three volumes have been enthusiastically received all over the world, and to date ornithologists and birdwatchers from over 100 countries have placed standing orders for the series. The prestige acquired

by the series has permitted us to enlarge the team of world-expert authors, thus consolidating the Handbook as a high quality international project.

If you are interested in birds, and would like to begin this important collection, now is an excellent time to do so. During the pre-publication campaign for Volume 4, we are also offering the possibility to acquire the first four volumes at a remarkable discount price.

In addition, you can now choose to pay in instalments, with no interest charged. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you require any further information. Do not miss this opportunity to build up the complete collection.

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Spain



A walk in Doddagubbi

*ZAFAR FUTEHALLY, No. 2205, Oakwood Apartments, Jakkasandra Layout, Koramangala 3rd Block,
8th Main, Bangalore 560 034*

On Sunday 8th February after my ride on Brave Trooper and Slash (7 a.m. to 9.30) I stepped out of our former residence to see the birds. It was a lovely day. It had been a very misty morning with visibility of less than half a furlong, but by 10 a.m. the sky was a speckless leaden blue, and a light breeze countered the effect of the tropical sun. Last February TN Perumal spotted the nest of a purple-rumped sunbird on a lantana bush in the lane near the gate, and I had hoped to see a fresh one again. But the lantana bush was no more. A little distance away on a silver oak there was a beautiful group of cattle egrets, 4 huddled together, suggesting a family bond, and three other individuals spaced apart from one another. All birds were snow white with no tinge of the brown breeding mantle which should appear next month. The cooing of spotted doves was very soothing.

The *coop coop coop* of coucals announced their presence. I doubt if there is any other species of bird which is so widely spread. You can hear their calls in the busiest part of the city as well as in the countryside. An omnivorous diet and a self confident temperament enables them to survive under unnatural conditions. The few koels around were quite silent. When the summer advances we will hear the *Tu-woo, Tu-woo, Tu-woo*, of the male, and the *click, click, click*, and the bubbling outbursts of the female. Koels are seekers of shade; they seemed to avoid the sun more than other birds. They also seem to be extremely fond of berries of the sandal tree, and undertake extraordinary contortions to reach the fruit. Bring an epiphyte do the birds play a part in their propagation.

There was just one blossom-headed parakeet on the electric wire and one male house sparrow a rare bird in Bangalore. No sign of the roseringed hordes which had probably gone to a Sunday party some distance away. The family of pied kingfishers were absent from the pond created by quarrying operations. Instead of the birds there were a hundred lambs being washed and scrubbed very thoroughly by two young boys, a pair of common green bee-eaters livened the scene.

Just as I was wondering why there were no swallows to be seen, I saw a dozen above a freshly coppiced eucalyptus field. Wait they were not swallows but the fresh leaves of the young plants cavorting in the breeze. It is astonishing how often one "sees" what one wishes to see. A number of black drongos were engaged in their normal pursuits of chasing butterflies and other winged prey. I focussed on one while it was sitting erect on the branch of a bare tree. With its wonted agility it did an instant about turn and swept on its prey 20 yards away. How did it see the insect behind its back. Does it have a 360 degree vision?

Almost all open land in this region is now under eucalyptus. In spite of their undoubted economic value, they are not a beautiful sight and arouse resentment because of the ecological damage they have caused. As I walked along I came across a few tamarinds, peepul, banyan, jackfruit and neem trees. What a difference to the eucalyptus in the shade they provide and food for so many forms of life.

I came to the Doddagubbi lake at noon or rather to the tank bed. There were only a few puddles of water, too small

even for a sandpiper. A cricket match was in full swing. Surprisingly there were 3 ducks in the largest "pond" and one looked like a pintail with its chocolate head and silver grey body. But they turned out to be a domesticated variety. A blackbellied finch lark treated me to its amazing aerobatics and the "crash" to the ground. There were four scavenger vultures, two white and two young ones. A coppersmith and a

small green barbet drummed away from the Karanj (Pongamei) trees on the bund adding some cheer to the landscape. A few pond herons, a single median egret (black bill, black legs and yellow feet) a large pied wagtail and a pair of pied bush chats indicated that given half a chance nature is willing to bounce back. Will we give it that chance?



ILLUSTRATION: ANN HOBDAK

In many ways the bittern is the most unlikely environmental celebrity you could imagine. Typical are the daft names by which it was once known to generations of country folk, my all-time favourite trio being Bitter Bum, Butter Bump and Bog Blutter. To many who heard its bizarre spring call, which is rather like the sound made by blowing into a bottle and is known as "booming", it was also a bad omen and cause for dismay.

Although we've now conquered these prejudices, there are other problems with its current flagship status, notably its invisibility. This is not just a question of rarity - although the current British population is probably less than 30 - it is also to do with the bird's legendary shyness. I live in the heart of Britain's bittern country and I average about one sighting a year. In more than a quarter century of ornithology I can recall just two observations that weren't of birds in flight and at considerable range. Ninety-nine percent of the public will never see one, so the attempt to sell the story of its demise as a highly relevant national issue should have been mission impossible.

But during the last decade the eco-salesmen of the conservation community have made the bittern the most

high-profile bird in the country. Its future, or lack of it, regularly finds its way on to the floor of the House of Commons. In East Anglia we have a railway line named after it. This year's major news was the £1.5 million paid out by the European Union's Life-Nature fund, and several other organisations have made smaller but substantial additional payments. Much of the money is now being ploughed into management of 10 wetland sites in East Anglia, stripping old reedbeds of decades of accumulated leaf litter, re-flooding new sites or cleaning out dyke systems.

At the Suffolk reserve of Minsmere, which belongs to the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, they've gone further. The males' booming calls have been studied and recorded so that they yield a type of audio fingerprint. Most have also been banded with colour-coded rings, which enables individual identification, while several have been fitted with radio transmitters and sport a flexible 15 cm aerial. This enables a research team to monitor their movements and plumb the mysteries of the bitterns' reed-enveloped lives. Testimony to how little this technology impedes their normal lifestyle is the tale of Alfie, one of two males at Minsmere and one of only 11 breeding males in Britain in 1997. Despite the hardware strapped to his leg, this two-year old is believed to have mated with five females and fathered the nine young reared at the reserve this year.

The long-term goal of all this effort is a British population of 100 pairs by 2020. Yet even if one divides the EU grant by this putative 21st century total, bitterns still work out at £15,000 a brace. Tell that to the citizens of Albania or Moldova, two of the 16 European nations where bitterns are in serious decline, and they could well laugh in your face. But tell that to a Minsmere warden and I suspect he'd argue that safeguarding a single bittern protects entire communities of plants, fish, frogs, newts, dragon flies, otters and waterbirds.

In short, the bittern symbolises an entire wetland panorama. But it also implies a wider vision: that on one of the most densely populated and highly developed landscapes on Earth we can still preserve an environment that is worth inhabiting. The warden might well argue that, silly as it sounds, securing the Bog Blutter is about securing our own future.

Hope springs in a Suffolk wetland

MARK COCKER in *Guardian Weekly*, December 2, 1997

On a Wing and a Scare

MARK COCKER in *Guardian Weekly*, November 30, 1997.

It first appeared at dusk - a pale blur ghosting over the meadows near Horsey, the most easterly, most untamed and beautiful of all the Norfolk Broads. As it came closer, I could see all the distinctive features of a barn owl: the white, heart-shaped facial disk, the staring black eyes, the buff-tinged wings held in a taut downward bow and whose minimal beat cut effortlessly through the damp air as it quartered back and forth across the fields.

Although British barn owls have suffered a steady decline this century, the local situation is in contrast to the species' wider success. It is one of the most cosmopolitan of all birds, ranging across six continents from the Pacific coast of Canada to Tierra del Fuego, and from western Ireland to Papua New Guinea. And with it has travelled a complex skein of folkloric beliefs. In fact, owls in general have probably given rise to a greater body of myth and superstition than any other family of birds.

Most of the associations relate to death and the creature's capacity to foretell human disaster, and for this reason they have been deeply feared around the world. Typically, in China they were believed to snatch away a person's soul or to suck the blood of children, some-times after assuming human form. Fear of the owl's presence or even simply of the sound of its call is still commonly found both among contemporary Africans and the indigenous peoples of North America. In Europe, until fairly recently, it was a widespread practice to nail owls to the barn door in order to ward off the evil eye.

The notions motivating these actions were not just the follies of ignorant country folk. The Victorian intellectual John Ruskin once wrote: "I have found the owl's cry always prophetic of mischief to me".

Sometimes owl beliefs bridge such huge geographical and cultural divides it seems more than a matter of coincidence. A typical example is the perception shared between tribespeople of West Africa and the Chiricahua Apache of Arizona and New Mexico, that the evil spell cast by an owl's visitation can be dispelled by chasing the bird off with a burning fire brand.

These fundamental similarities, right down to minute details, have led the Finnish ornithologist, Heimo Mikkola, a



ILLUSTRATION: ANN HOBBY

leading authority on the birds, to propose a common origin for all these ideas. Mikkola suggests that the magical beliefs first travelled from Africa with the earliest migrations of humankind, then radiated outwards with the global spread of palaeolithic cultures.

Despite the possibility of a common origin there are also striking contradictions between some owl associations. It is easy to see why, given the owl's presumed gift of foresight, they have become symbols of wisdom and intelligence, especially in Europe. But more difficult to grasp is why they have also become synonymous with stupidity. In Finland, the word *Pöllö* means both an ignorant person and an owl. The ancient Romans also believed that some owls were so foolish they could be induced to twist their heads round and round until they throttled themselves.

Meanwhile my real, living Horsey barn owl had pitched down on some prospective prey and been swallowed briefly by the long vegetation. For a few seconds it was invisible, then suddenly I could see it again, the great moth's wings gathering in the evening silence in wide, rhythmic wingbeats. And up it rose, free of the tangled grass, free once more of the earth, and free also from the confusing knot of human superstition.



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Cover: Great Stone Plover (*Esacus magnirostris*) is essentially a riverine bird, frequenting rocky beds of larger rivers. Its massive bill and large yellow - 'goggle eyes' are diagnostic. Shy and wary, it prefers to run and crouch than fly when alarmed. Its bill is well adapted for prising up stones to procure crabs, frogs and molluscs lurking under them.

Photo: S. Sridhar, ARPS